

# **A Christian Response to Immigration in the United States**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The migration of people groups, families, and individuals has been a phenomenon that has existed as long as there have been cycles of drought and famine, the need for greater security and safety, and turmoil caused by war. Currently, the numbers of immigrants has reached a staggering 191 million worldwide.<sup>1</sup> In the United States alone, immigrant numbers have reached 38 million<sup>2</sup> and account for an amazing 28.9 percent of the country's population growth since 1970.<sup>3</sup> Join these huge numbers with concerns of overpopulation and the legality issues of immigration it is not surprising that people have started to form polarizing opinions on the subject. In particular, the immigration issues in the United States are centered on concerns of the large movement of illegal (or undocumented) immigrants from Mexico. Christians and non-Christians alike have quickly formed opinions and taken sides, but not necessarily based on Christian values and a close look at Biblical principles. This paper will attempt to give some framework for thinking about immigration in the United States in light of the Gospel of Christ, and move the conversation away from polarizing viewpoints towards reconciling responses. First, we will take an overall look at immigration in the United States and its issues. Secondly, we will see how Old Testament and New Testament scriptures can provide direction for Christians as we employ a Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic<sup>4</sup> to this issue to make headway. Finally, we will propose a Christian way of looking at this issue highlighting corporate and personal responses that are appropriate in light of the testimony of Scripture.

## **IMMIGRATION DESCRIPTION**

The United States is a country born of immigrants. The majority of the population is descended from those who came to this country searching for a better life. But despite this history, "Americans have always tended to romanticize the immigrants of their grandparents'

generation while casting a skeptical eye on contemporary newcomers.”<sup>5</sup> Some of the earliest laws concerning immigrants were the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Between 1917 and 1952 anti-immigrant feelings came into their own when Congress “...began methodically to limit all immigration.”<sup>6</sup> In 1965 the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed and finally allowed 20 million immigrants to gain permanent residence status in the United States over the next 30 years.<sup>7</sup> Despite the U.S.’s open policies, illegal immigration started to rise. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act sought to stop the flood of illegal immigrants, but was touted as a failure in its attempt.<sup>8</sup> The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was launched in 1994 and although it sought economic reform, the outcome was disastrous. NAFTA’s original creators thought “...that as goods and services began to flow...one commodity – low-wage labor – would remain largely fixed.”<sup>9</sup> The result was exactly the opposite as NAFTA’s policies demolished job opportunities and pushed many Mexican laborers from their own lands into the United States in search of jobs to support their families.<sup>10</sup> “Today, some 11.5 million illegal aliens reside in the U.S. – quadruple the population of two decades ago...and the number is growing by an estimated 500,000 a year.”<sup>11</sup>

The large influx of immigrants (especially illegal or undocumented) in the last twenty years is caused by a “continuous interplay between a lack of opportunities in the country of origin (the push factor) and the drive to meet the needs of American business, industry, and farming (the pull factor).”<sup>12</sup> NAFTA is one example of a push factor. As trade increased between the U.S. and Mexico, prices on consumer goods imported to Mexico were cheaper than Mexican products. Jobs were destroyed and Mexican laborers moved north to the U.S. to find much-needed jobs. One pull factor is the United States’ own demand for cheap laborers, especially in agriculture. The increase of college-educated workers in white-collar jobs has

increased the need for agricultural and lower-skilled laborers in the market. This demand has pulled on the large un-educated labor force of Mexico to meet its needs. Mexican laborers, unable to gain access to work visas, move into the U.S. illegally just to make ends meet for their families.

Concerns over this immigration in the U.S., especially illegal immigration, has erupted into polarizing views with adherents on either side, as well as a continuum of moderate views. Anti-immigrant (or restrictionist) sentiment has frequently claimed negative aspects of both legal and illegal immigration such as "...depressed wages, burdened government resources, and...a net drain on the economy."<sup>13</sup> They center in on the costs of undocumented workers in the US in increased health care costs, lower social security benefits, higher taxes for residents, and fewer jobs for U.S.-born natives. Solutions to immigration issues for this group have included completely closed borders, the building of a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and deportation of all illegal immigrants with no chance for amnesty. Although some anti-immigration groups are extreme in their viewpoint criticizing all forms of immigration (legal and illegal), many groups' concerns are only with illegal immigration. All of these groups value low population growth, conservation of natural resources, and the sustaining of perceived traditional American values and way of life.

Immigration advocates have claimed just the opposite: immigrants have had positive effects overall on the United States by their hard work ethic, filling jobs that native-born may not take, paying into Social Security and taxes without receiving money back, and creating lower prices for consumer goods through cheap labor.<sup>14</sup> Their solutions include open borders for immigrants, guest worker programs that allow easy access to jobs, and amnesty for those illegal immigrants who have been in the U.S. for significant periods of time. Again, not every

immigration advocate goes as far as open borders, but proposes solutions that are driven by the needs of those who choose to come to America illegally. These groups value human rights and the dignity of people.

Again, these are two polarized opposite views, and there are a broad range of intermediate thoughts about the benefits and costs of immigration, as well as the solutions. The in-between views propose solutions which include some sort of guest-worker program that sets limits on total free movement across borders, but allows a certain number of migrants to enter the United States for certain periods of time related to jobs. Of note in these debates is the fact that the current arguments seem to largely focus on the practical economic impacts of hosting undocumented or illegal immigrants. Both sides of the issue quote plenty of statistics in their favor and challenge the validity of the other viewpoints' numbers. There seems to be no end to the arguments based upon statistics and down utilitarian lines. In fact, "Discussion of the economic, demographic, and political data of migration is seldom a simple exercise of figuring costs and benefits. Our very descriptions of migrants...betray our implicit evaluative assessments."<sup>15</sup>

Where does the Church stand on this issue? "By and large the church as a whole has chosen to maintain a discreet silence on this most pressing socio-ethical issue..."<sup>16</sup> Some of the voices have included the Catholic Church, mainline liberal Protestant denominations, and some socially active Evangelical organizations. But the Church is torn between the two sides of the issue, and frequently degenerates to argument from the economic or law standpoint.

For example, some Christian debate often centers on Romans 12 and Paul's admonition to the Roman Christians to obey the law of the land. These Christians argue that Romans 12 is prescriptive for Christians today, and any actions that disobey the law of the land receive the

consequences of breaking that law. Since many immigrants have come to the U.S. without gaining the necessary work visas, they are considered illegal and their legal status should first be resolved (since they are breaking the law). Illegal Immigrants that are caught should be deported as a natural consequence of not obeying the law of the land. If these undocumented workers would first seek to enter the United States legally, then Christians could be disposed to help and welcome them as someone who is not defying the laws that God has allowed government to institute. This view tends to be retributive in its idea of justice. It does not seek to restore the relationships that God's justice demands. Nor does it seek to address the problems of oppression and corruption that cause the problems in the first place.

Other Christians see Paul's admonition as prescriptive, but able to be broken if the laws of the land go against others of God's values and principles. This second group views welcoming the stranger and caring for those in need of paramount importance, and more important than breaking the laws of the land...especially if those who come to the U.S. illegally are there because they are in poverty, unable to make a living elsewhere, and unable to gain work visas for a variety of reasons. Often this group can advocate towards open borders without trying to work within the limitations of governmental law.

In the midst of all these opinions and debates, divides and polarizations, and oftentimes silence among Christians, what should be a distinctively Christian response to this pressing social issue? First, we need to take a look at some Scriptures that may help us.

### **HERMENEUTICS & IMMIGRATION**

In the Old Testament, people are infused with a special dignity because God creates humans in his own image.<sup>17</sup> This special dignity of people who are made in the image of God is the basis for the admonitions to care for those who cannot care for themselves, which includes

the poor and the sojourner.<sup>18</sup> In both Old and New Testaments, there is an emphasis on caring for those in need which not only include the poor, orphan, and widow,<sup>19</sup> but also the sojourner and stranger in the land.<sup>20</sup> Jesus communicates that caring for those in need (which includes the stranger) is caring for Jesus himself.<sup>21</sup> Those who do not care for the sick, the poor, and the stranger will go away to eternal punishment. The New Testament goes further and advises treating strangers well because they might be angels in disguise.<sup>22</sup> The uniqueness of humans as the only being in God's creation that are made in his image imbues us with a special dignity that demands care for those who are in need. There is never a person with whom we lock eyes that is not important to God. This idea is summed up in Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself and he demonstrates it with a parable about a Samaritan who helps a Jew even at great danger to himself, and to help out someone who most likely despised him.<sup>23</sup>

God's people in the Old Testament are frequently refugees and immigrants themselves. Abraham is called by God to leave his home land and go to a new land...as an immigrant.<sup>24</sup> Jacob flees to Haran for fear of Esau's revenge,<sup>25</sup> and later returns to Canaan with all of his possessions at God's command.<sup>26</sup> Israel is forced to sojourn to Egypt because of famine.<sup>27</sup> God delivers them via Moses and leads them to the promised land through forty years sojourn in the wilderness.<sup>28</sup> And God punishes Israel and Judah for their disobedience by sending them into exile to Babylon.<sup>29</sup>

These immigrations, especially the stay in Egypt, are God's basis for commanding the Israelites to care for those who are aliens, strangers, and sojourners in their own land. God specifically tells them that "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt..."<sup>30</sup> Of importance here is the significant movement away from other Near East cultural legislations.

“While instructions and stories about offering personal hospitality to strangers were common in ancient Near-Eastern texts, explicit legislation regarding the protection of, and provision for, the resident alien (*ger*) was distinctive to Israelite society.”<sup>31</sup> Here we can see the distinctive move by God away from the societies around Israel with legislation for the protection and provision of those who are most vulnerable.

The New Testament continues with this theme of refugee and alien when Jesus himself was a refugee to Egypt.<sup>32</sup> Jesus was also constantly on the move during his own ministry and was a frequent guest in people’s homes and supported by some of the women who followed him. The New Testament also points out that the Old Testament heroes of faith were “strangers and exiles on the earth.”<sup>33</sup> Paul remarks that Christians are not to put their minds on earthly things, but on heavenly things which is where their true identity lies.<sup>34</sup> Christians’ true identity is no longer as strangers and aliens to God, but part of his household.<sup>35</sup> But this also means that they are now strangers and aliens in and to the world. Peter continues this theme as he writes, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”<sup>36</sup> The New Testament never hints that Christians are other than strangers in this world. Christian identity as exiles is continued from the Old Testament into the New and will not be resolved until Jesus comes again.

The Scriptures from both the Old and New Testaments reveal several inherent values for those who call themselves Christians. First of all, people have dignity and worth. Their value as people is not based upon a cost-benefit analysis of what they can provide for a society. Rather, their value is based upon being made in the image of God. Christians need to ignore the arguments that focus on what immigrants can and cannot do for our country, and focus instead on the fact that they are people made in the image of God and need to be treated as such

regardless of their legal or illegal status. Furthermore, any policies which oppress people and force them into an unjust system disregards this basic human dignity.

Secondly, the identity of the People of God is deeply rooted in their inclusion in the family of God. Their primary identity is found in the Church, not in any national identity or interests. The debates around illegal immigration seem to be concerned with maintaining a national identity, or creating a new one. But for Christians national identity can never be the root of who we are. Christians need to stand by Jesus and the values of the Kingdom and not be swayed by nationalist rhetoric. The Church can only claim Jesus as its final allegiance and all decisions about immigration need to be made in light of him. “The people of God...are not part of a specific nationality but are chosen by grace in Christ from all nations...national elements cannot dominate the Church (Gal. 3, Col. 3), because the members are one in Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

Thirdly, because the history and the current status of the People of God is rooted in immigration, refugee, and alien identity then it drives the way in which Christians respond to others who are aliens and strangers. In the Old Testament, the concerns were about what widows, orphans, and immigrants needed. The focus was never on what was good for Israel or individuals economically, but on what the most marginalized needed. Christians should never base arguments on what they should be doing based on worldly economic arguments. Do we not have a God that owns the cattle on a thousand hills?<sup>38</sup> That knowledge should free us up to not worry about how immigrants may affect the economy, but allow us instead to worry about how we can fix the issues that have pushed them into their situation, and care for them in the midst of it. In fact, the Christian emphasis on hospitality is derived from this identity: “The best hosts, those who are able to make a life-giving place for others, understand themselves as aliens and strangers.”<sup>39</sup>

Fourth, the People of God are to respond to those in need as if they are responding to Christ. An understanding of how to relate to immigrants or those in need must always be viewed through the lens that sees Jesus in their faces. Jesus never commands Christians to ask questions or make demands of those who need care. He simply invites believers into a position in which they respond positively to need as if the one who is in need is Christ himself. Therefore Christians can only approach immigrants as if Jesus is the one whose family is in need and needs to make money to make ends meet.

Fifth, caring for the poor is of the greatest concern for the family of believers, and caring for those who are impoverished has never been subject to demands for rightness before we help. Jesus is our greatest example in this when Scripture says that "...God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>40</sup> Just as Christ helps us in our darkest moments because he loves us, we also as Christians need to extend help and hope even to those who may be in the U.S. illegally. Christian charity should never be dependent on how closely someone is following the law.

### **A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

With these values gleaned from the pages of Scripture, what can Christians practically do to help immigrants (mainly illegal, but also legal) in their plight? First of all, Christian employers can provide jobs to undocumented workers and seek to work within the legal framework of our country to gain work visas for their laborers. Since it is easier to apply for visas if a job is offered, a Christian employer can really help immigrants by becoming an advocate for them. The employer can go farther and solicit workers legally from Mexico that may be in need of jobs.

For those Christians who know undocumented immigrants personally, writing letters of recommendation and providing sponsorship may be a good way of helping them to gain more permanent residence. One friend that I knew married an American, but they needed letters of reference to prove that the marriage was not just to gain a green card. I wrote a letter (along with others) that helped to solidify not only his marriage status, but also put him on the path towards citizenship. Many Christians know immigrants in similar situations, and they can advocate for them in this way.

Christians can also provide resources to immigrants. Many immigrants (again, both legal and illegal) come from regions that have different customs than ours and may not understand how to navigate the American systems. As Christians, we can provide invaluable help in helping them figure out how to get around, where to shop to get the best deals, where to find basic necessities such as medical help and food, helping them with their English, driving them places if they are without transportation, and helping them to find other resources that are cheap and/or free. For example, several secular organizations in Albuquerque, New Mexico put out a manual that lists resources in town for the under/un-insured Spanish-speaking community (which, of course, includes immigrants).<sup>41</sup> Christians can and should be doing the same.

Christians can also volunteer at organizations that specifically minister to the needs of the immigrant community. One example is East Central Ministries (ECM)<sup>42</sup> in Albuquerque, New Mexico which reaches out to two neighborhoods that historically have been the locus of many immigrants in New Mexico. The primary populations are Latino and Vietnamese. ECM seeks to provide computer training, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and community development projects which include a community garden, medical and dental care, clothing bank, and a garden watering system that creates jobs and income. They are constantly in need of

volunteers to work hands-on with immigrants and their issues, but also with various maintenance and organizational needs as well. Christians cannot only volunteer with such groups, but they could also start these types of organizations in their cities or towns where they do not exist already.

The Church as a whole can also be sensitive to immigrants in their midst. The Church can provide affordable housing, meals, and other services that could help these sojourners make a place in this country. Those in the Church with legal experience can put their skills to use to try and find ways to gain legal visas for those who are undocumented.

I hesitate at this point to advocate that the Church should pursue an open border policy. I believe it is wise for the government to regulate the border somehow because of other illegal activities such as terrorism and drugs. Where the Church comes in though is that it needs to be involved with public policy making in the form of political advocacy for immigrants. Many of the decisions made about the border and about policies that affect Mexico (and therefore movement across the border) are decisions that Christians can lobby for or against in the political arena. Especially with economic policies (such as NAFTA) that erode the well-being of those across the border, the Church can step into those political arenas to remove laws that create unjust systems.

Personally, what I can do is create an urban missions experience for the students that I work with in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship over Spring Break. We would partner with East Central Ministries in Albuquerque, New Mexico and explore Christian responses to immigration. I can create some curriculum that helps the students to look at Scripture, move through a Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic, and work through a Christian response to immigration themselves. As we partner with ECM, the students can volunteer alongside of undocumented

immigrants and hear their stories. They can also learn first-hand the issues and needs of these workers. I can also supplement my teaching with those from ECM who have more knowledge and experience...and bring in any outside speakers that may help to illuminate the issues for students. Hopefully, this missions experience would help students later on as they come into contact with undocumented immigrants, and as they influence their churches towards appropriate responses.

In conclusion, the current issues of immigration in the United States need to be approached by the Church in a thoroughly Christian way. The Church should seek to not be silent, and to not be swayed by the secular arguments that surround this issue. Instead of focusing on the pros and cons of the economic viability of immigrants, the Church should maintain an understanding of their own role as exiles in this world, of Jesus' commands towards loving others, of God's desire for justice for those made in his image, and of hospitality. Armed with this good hermeneutic of Scripture, the Church can feel confident in its position, it can make positive headway, and it can love immigrants in the ways that Jesus would have loved them.

## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Thalif Deen, "Development: Pros and Cons of International Migration," *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 15 September 2006; available from; <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34748>; Internet.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Edwin S. Rubenstein, "Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency – Immigration Fiscal Impact Statement," *The Social Contract Press*, Winter 2007-2008; available from; [http://www.thesocialcontract.com/artman2/publish/tsc\\_18\\_2/tsc\\_18\\_2\\_rubenstein\\_doe.shtml](http://www.thesocialcontract.com/artman2/publish/tsc_18_2/tsc_18_2_rubenstein_doe.shtml); Internet.
- <sup>4</sup> William J. Webb. *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001. p 30.
- <sup>5</sup> Linda Chavez, "The Realities of Immigration," *Commentary*, July-August 2006, 35.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>9</sup> John Fanestil, "NAFTA and Mexican Immigration: Where the Jobs Are," *Christian Century*, 18 September 2007, 9.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>11</sup> Linda Chavez, "The Realities of Immigration," *Commentary*, July-August 2006, 35.
- <sup>12</sup> M. Daniel Carroll R. *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church and the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 2008. p 30.
- <sup>13</sup> Linda Chavez, "The Realities of Immigration," *Commentary*, July-August 2006, 36.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>15</sup> William R. O'Neill, S.J. and William C. Spohn, "Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Immigration and Refugee Policy," *Theological Studies*, No. 59 (1998), 90.
- <sup>16</sup> G. E. Gorman, "Migrants, Immigration, and the Church," *Communio Viatorium*, XXI (1978), 109.
- <sup>17</sup> Genesis 1:27
- <sup>18</sup> Leviticus 23:22
- <sup>19</sup> James 1:27
- <sup>20</sup> Exodus 22:21
- <sup>21</sup> Matthew 25:31-46
- <sup>22</sup> Hebrews 13:2
- <sup>23</sup> Luke 10:27-37
- <sup>24</sup> Genesis 12:1
- <sup>25</sup> Genesis 27:43
- <sup>26</sup> Genesis 31:3
- <sup>27</sup> Genesis 46:3
- <sup>28</sup> Deuteronomy 29:5
- <sup>29</sup> Jeremiah 29:4
- <sup>30</sup> Leviticus 19:34
- <sup>31</sup> Christine D. Pohl, "Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXI (2003), 6.
- <sup>32</sup> Matthew 2:14
- <sup>33</sup> Hebrews 11:13
- <sup>34</sup> Colossians 3:1-4
- <sup>35</sup> Ephesians 2:9
- <sup>36</sup> 1 Peter 2:11
- <sup>37</sup> G. E. Gorman, "Migrants, Immigration, and the Church," *Communio Viatorium*, XXI (1978), 110.
- <sup>38</sup> Psalm 50:10
- <sup>39</sup> Christine D. Pohl, "Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXI (2003), 9.
- <sup>40</sup> Romans 5:8
- <sup>41</sup> *Salud Manual*, accessed 21 August 2008; available from; <http://www.saludmanual.org>; Internet.
- <sup>42</sup> *East Central Ministries, Inc.*, accessed 21 August 2008; <http://www.eastcentralministries.org>; Internet.

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